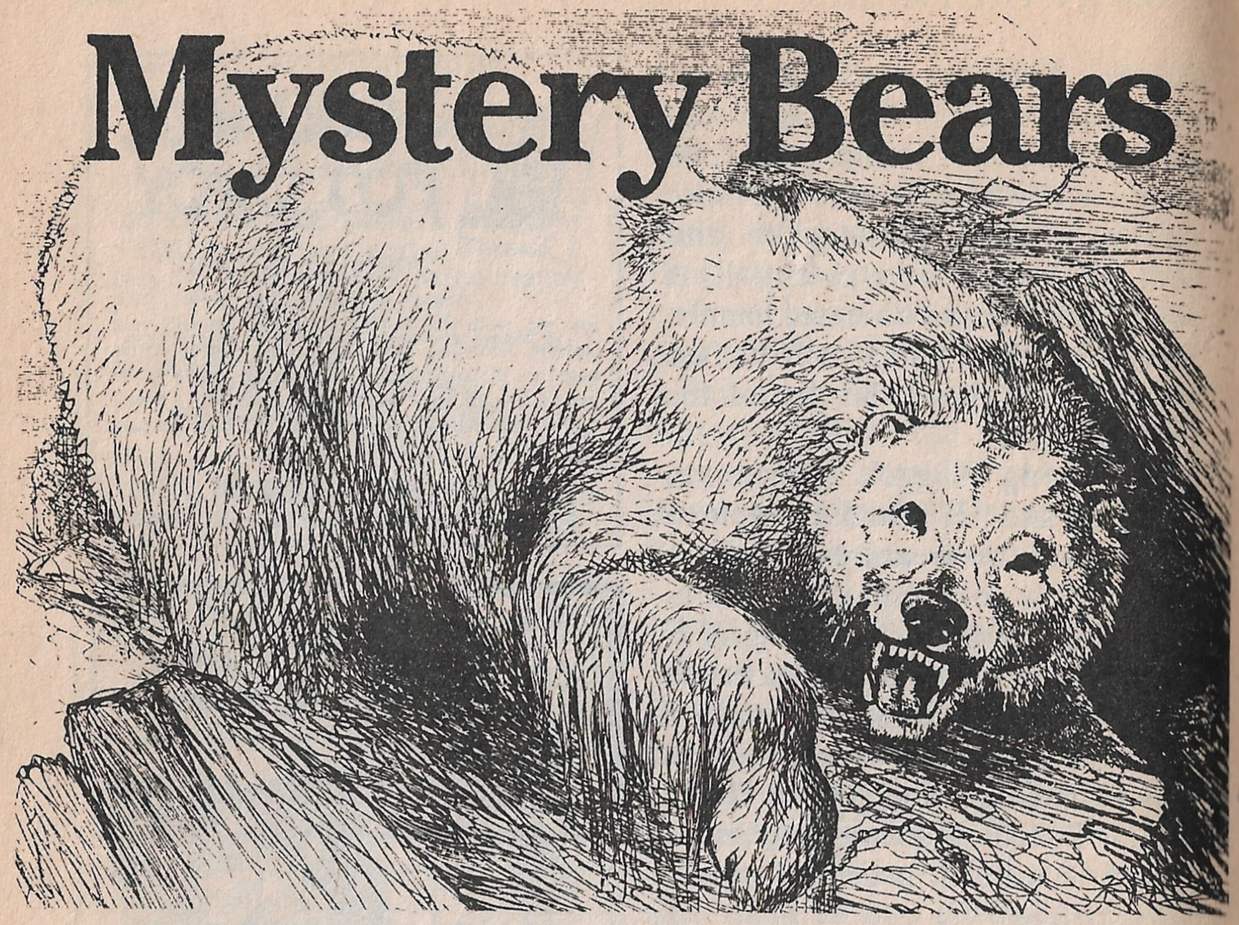
Mystery Bears



Do prehistoric bears still prowl the backwaters of the world?
Eyewitness testimony and physical evidence say yes.

By Karl P. N. Shuker

IN RECENT months the cryptozoological grapevine has been buzzing with the news that a Soviet team of hunters with full support from interested scientists is seeking a mysterious form of giant bear — as white as a polar bear but much larger in size — which apparently inhabits the region of the Russian Kamchatka peninsula bordering on the United States' Aleutian Islands.

Known to the local reindeer hunters as the *irkuiem* (or *irquiem*), it is said to be a one-ton bear with a small head, long limbs, narrow body and, most intriguing of all, a curious gait which involves putting its forelegs forward first and then pulling up its hindlimbs — likened by some to the ambulatory movements of a giant caterpillar. Reports of the *irkuiem* first appeared in September 1987 in the Russian newspaper *Pravda*, followed by further Soviet reports and eventually by widespread coverage in newspapers and magazines throughout the world.

The team is led by experienced hunter Rodin Sivolobov, who has collected many eyewitness accounts of the *irkuiem* and has received from Kamchatka reindeer hunters the skin of what seems at least on first sight to be an enormous polar bear but which the hunters adamantly insist to be from an *irkuiem*.

Moreover, the noted Soviet zoologist Nikolaj Vereshchagin, who got interested in this animal when Sivolobov told him about it in the winter of 1986-87, has suggested that it could actually be a surviving line of the giant short-faced bear *Arctodus simus*, believed extinct since the Pleistocene. Like the *irkuiem*, the short-faced bear was of huge stature, with a short body, long limbs and relatively small head, a carnivore, capable of running at high speeds. It was undoubtedly one of the most feared predators of its time.

Vereshchagin told *Pravda* that he thought a new, eighth type of bear may still exist. Vereshchagin, along with the rest of the world, now awaits further news of the *irkuiem* — to discover whether it is indeed to be included alongside the brown bear, sun bear, Himalayan black bear, sloth bear, American black bear, polar bear and spectacled bear as the eighth species of ursine carnivore alive today.

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AS IT happens, however, the *irkuiem* is by no means unique. Indeed, there may be not only an eighth species of bear but also a ninth, 10th, 11th and perhaps even more species awaiting official scientific recognition — judging at least from a notable dossier of accounts of mystery bears from all over the world.

Take South America, for example. The only species of bear officially known to exist here today is the spectacled bear *Tremarctos ornatus*, a diminutive black-furred form inhabiting this continent's northwestern countries and named after the distinctive yellow-furred rings encircling its eyes. The latter markings plus its small size yield a morphology unique to this species; it cannot be mistaken for any other bear form — which therefore makes a report by explorer Leonard Clark of great cryptozoological worth.

In his book *The Rivers Ran East* (1954) Clark reported that while traveling with companions on a river raft, he observed an extremely large, all-black bear in northern Peru's Gran Pajonal forest. Using its powerful claws, the bear was pulling apart an ants' nest ensconced within a decaying tree stump. A noise made by the paddle of one of Clark's companions distracted this mysterious beast, which promptly dived into the river just ahead of their raft, onto which it then attempted to clamber. Clark was forced to shoot it, killing it instantly. He tried to drag its body onto the raft so that it could be preserved for formal scientific study. Unfortunately a shoal of piranhas had other ideas. Clark was forced to abandon the body and to make a hasty exit.

He subsequently learned from the Campa Indians that this giant-bear form

was well known to them, referred to locally as the *milne*. He also learned that another mystery-bear type, this time red-furred, allegedly inhabited the lower eastern Andean ranges. Moreover, according to Bernard Heuvelmans' checklist of unknown animals (published in the 1986 issue of *Cryptozoology*), strange bears have also been reported from the Muscarena Mountains of Colombia. Perhaps some of the extinct bears that shared South America with the spectacled bear during the Pleistocene are not extinct after all.

An equally mysterious New World bear is on record far to the north, in the Barren Ground area of Canada. On June 24, 1864, a huge yellow-furred bear was killed by two Eskimo hunters in the vicinity of Rendezvous Lake, northeast of Fort Anderson, Mackenzie. Three weeks later arctic explorer-naturalist Roderick MacFarlane arrived

Huge yellow-furred bear killed in 1864 may have been last surviving member of ancient giants.

and carefully examined the dead bear's remains. Its skin and skull were preserved and ultimately reached the U.S. National Museum, where the creature was catalogued and thereafter largely forgotten. After all, Barren Ground had many grizzly bears, which was all this latest specimen seemed to be.

Indeed, over the next half-century this museum received many more grizzly bears, from all over North America, until such an impressive collection had been established that the renowned American naturalist C. Hart Merriam used it as he prepared a definitive review of North America's wide variety of grizzly forms. Only then did MacFarlane's mighty yellow specimen finally receive full scientific attention — as a result of which it was duly labeled as something very special indeed.

His detailed morphological studies suggested to Merriam that this was no ordinary Barren Ground grizzly. In fact, he felt that it was not a grizzly bear at all. Neither its hair coloration nor (of much greater taxonomic significance) its skull characteristics seemed consistent with a grizzly. In Merriam's opinion these features were so different that he decided this anomalous bear may be more closely related to the spectacled bear and the extinct giant bear *Arctotherium*. Consequently he designated it as the type specimen of a totally new species — and genus — or bear, which he christened *Vetularctos inopinatus* ("the ancient, unexpected bear"), and formally documented it on February 9, 1918, in the *Survey of North American Fauna, No. 41*, produced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Biology Division.

Clearly, MacFarlane's ancient, unexpected bear — sometimes also referred to as the patriarchal bear — had all the promise of being one of the greatest zoological discoveries of the century — a radically new species supported by incontrovertible physical evidence. Yet remarkably, it has instead slipped into almost total zoological obscurity. Nowadays *Vetularctos inopinatus* is conspicuous only by its absence from modern-day publications dealing with mammalian carnivores. So what went wrong?

Subsequent researches into the grizzly bears of North America have suggested that the wide morphological variation that led Merriam and others to consider that many different species were present is really nothing more than individual variation. Equally, the peculiarities possessed by *Vetularctos* have been attributed by modern-day researchers to this same factor, although in the case of *Vetularctos* this explanation is not wholly convincing. The major problem is that only a single specimen of *Vetularctos* is available for study; no other is known. Added to this is the comparable dilemma (and one that is unusual for a large-sized terrestrial mystery beast) that little if anything concerning it has been documented in the form of eyewitness accounts, local lore or legends.

As George Goodwin noted in his

own account of *Vetularctos* published in *Natural History* (November 1946), the only notable exception to this absence of other evidence appears in *On Snow-Shoes to the Barren Grounds*, written by Casper Whitney and published toward the end of the 19th Century. This book contains a passage that may well refer to *V. inopinatus*, describing a strange type of bear which, though found on the Anderson River near the Rocky Mountains, may travel as far as the Barren Ground in its search for food. Whitney wrote of

> ... a peculiar looking bear, seeming a cross between the grizzly and the polar, and it has this peculiarity, that its hind claws are as big as the fore claws, while its head looks somewhat like that of an Eskimo dog, very broad in the forehead, with square, long muzzle, and ears set on quite like the dog's. It is very wide at the shoulders, and its robe in color resembles the grizzly.

Rather less precise descriptions of giant bears are also present in traditional myths of a number of Indian tribes — as well as legends of giant polars (comparable with the *irkuiem*?) referred to as *qoqogaq* by the arctic Alaskan Eskimos, according to Diamond Jenness in the May 1953 issue of *Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska.*

So what can we say about *Vetularctos*? Perhaps it is nothing more than an aberrant individual of the grizzly-bear species. Or it may truly be a new species, to be verified upon the procurement of further material — assuming, of course, that this bear form still exists. It may, after all; no one appears to have specifically searched for it. It is equally possible, as writer-naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton has suggested, that MacFarlane's specimen may well have been the very last survivor of a distinctive dynasty of bears whose reign climaxed in an earlier period of time — ancient bears known and perhaps feared by our ancestors but ultimately reduced to a last, anachronistic individual whose death in June 1864 brought the noble line of *Vetularctos* to a tragic, ignominious end.

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LONG BEFORE the *irkuiem* became news, the forested peninsula of Kamchatka was already noted for very large bears, but this time for its long-haired brown bears, first made known to science in 1898 and sometimes referred to as *Ursus arctos beringianus*. Officially, the mighty Kodiak bear *U. a. middendorffi*, with an average total length of eight feet (240 cm) in the male, is the largest bear form alive today, but in 1936 Sten Bergman suggested that Kamchatka may possess a truly gigantic, short-furred, all-black bear form which exceeds in size all other bears.

Dr. Bergman was shown the pelt of one of these mysterious out-size beasts in the fall of 1920 and he also recorded an equally colossal skull allegedly from one such bear, plus an enormous bear pawprint measuring 37 cm in length and 25 cm in width. Both the skull and the pawprint had been observed (and, in the case of the pawprint, photographed) by fellow Swedish scientist Rene Malaise during his nine-year inhabitation of Kamchatka.

The existence of such a bear form in this region has been supported to some extent by Russian sources, according to David Day, who noted in his *The Doomsday Book of Animals* (1981) that weights of 653 kg, 500 kg and 685 kg have been recorded by Russian hunters from specimens here. But as the most recent records concerning such huge bears as these (which have been assigned the name *U. a. piscator*) date back to the early 1920's, it must be assumed that they have since disappeared.

Is "Nepalese tree bear" merely a juvenile form of Himalayan black?

Cryptozoological creatures are, by definition, animals that have succeeded in remaining hidden from scientific scrutiny. Nevertheless in some cases specimens of such creatures have indeed been on hand (sometimes for a number of years) for scientific examination even if scientists didn't realize it. One example involves a mysterious Nepalese bear — which may prove eventually to have been represented for several years by a living specimen in a large zoo! But let's start at the beginning:

While carrying out field work in the wooded Barun Valley around Mount Makalu's foothills in Nepal during February 1983, Daniel Taylor-Ide (director of West Virginia's Woodlands Institute) and colleague Robert L. Fleming became intrigued by reports from local villagers that two totally different forms of bear existed in the area. One, a large, ground-living black type, was the Himalayan black bear *Ursus* [formerly *Selenarctos*] *thibetanus*, but what was the zoological identity of the smaller, more agile and arboreal type that the villagers referred to as the tree bear?

Eventually some skulls of this latter bear were obtained and it was found that their premolars and first two molars were consistently smaller than those of the Himalayan black bear. Coupling this difference with the above-noted morphological and behavioral differences and adding to it further details supplied by villagers, Dr. Taylor-Ide began to wonder if the tree bear could actually comprise a hitherto-unknown species. He proposed *Ursus nepalensis* as a scientific name for it.

But the most startling revelation was still to come. In the subsequent report prepared by J. Richard Greenwell for the *ISC Newsletter* (Spring 1984) from information supplied to the International Society of Cryptozoology by Taylor-Ide, further researches had revealed that a small black bear housed for the past two years in Kathmandu Zoo and freely observed by the zoo's many visitors ever since may well in fact be a living specimen of Nepal's "newly-discovered" tree bear!

After securing the King of Nepal's permission, a scientific team tranquilized this enigmatic little bear and took a full set of body measurements for detailed morphometric analysis.

Further expeditions to the Barun Valley brought additional skulls to light, making a grand total of 11. Dashing everyone's hopes, this new material did not provide the hoped-for proof that the team was truly dealing with a new species. Instead, as reported in a second *ISC Newsletter* report (Spring 1985), it suggested the reverse. When the collection of tree-bear skulls was added to others from the Himalayan black bear, a distinct transition (rather than a discrete separation) in skull size was readily apparent between the skulls from the two bear types.

This in turn strongly indicated that the former bear type was in reality

nothing more than a juvenile's version of the latter, rather than a distinct species in its own right. And as for the reported differences in behavior between the two types, this could be explained as an inevitable consequence of bear overpopulation of the region. To avoid excessive competition for food and living space, the juveniles sought refuge in the trees, becoming predominantly terrestrial only when they became adults.

Although a juvenile Himalayan black bear is now the favored identity for the Nepalese tree bear, the matter has still not been conclusively resolved. Similarly, the precise range in which the tree-bear phenomenon exists has yet to be defined as well. In a letter published in the *ISC Newsletter* in Summer 1986, Raza Teshin remarked that in his 1934 book *Shikay Memoirs* Lt. Col. H. S. Wood wrote that a small variety of the Himalayan black bear was readily differentiated by the Nepalese people, who refer to it as *Sano Reech*. Yet, according to Teshin, Wood's favorite hunting grounds were in Assam, not in the Barun Valley area explored by Taylor-Ide and colleagues, which thereby indicates that this latter region is by no means the entire range of tree-bear occurrence, whatever its taxonomic status may prove to be.

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NO LESS mystifying is the Shennongjia white bear. Prior to the early 1960's, reports of all-white bears referred to as *bai-xiong* by natives of the mountain forests of China's Hubei Province were dismissed by scientists as confused accounts of the giant panda.

Since then, however, at least four living specimens of this creamy-colored bear have been captured and housed in zoos at Beijing and Wuhan. At first it was assumed that these simply comprised a pale color morph (local variation) of the brown bear *Ursus arctos*, whose range of color is remarkable. But more recently, some Chinese scientists have suggested that it constitutes a separate taxonomic form, the product of a considerable period of evolution in isolation from other *Ursus arctos* representatives. In short, it may be a separate subspecies — possibly even a distinct species — rather than a mere color form.

It is ironic that the most famous of all mystery bears, the notorious Nandi bear of central Africa, is the one that is definitely not a bear at all, although it may well be a number of other animals (including honey badgers, hyenas, very large baboons, and perhaps a modern-day chalicothere). Even so, Africa may possess a bona fide mystery bear too. During the Pleistocene the brown bear not only existed throughout Eurasia and North America but also was present in much of northern Africa — represented here by the diminutive subspecies *U. a. faidherbianus*.

Moreover, such animals evidently persisted into Recent times here, for small brown bears were frequently reported in this area up to the Christian period, and their remains have been discovered in association with human

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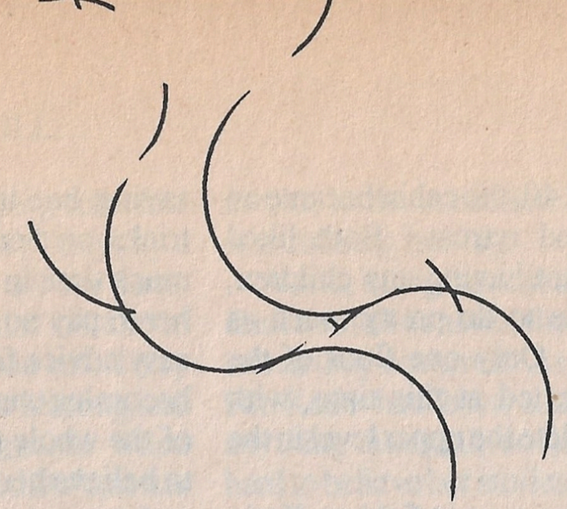
artifacts of this date. By the 19th Century, however, Africa's bears had become notably rare, confined largely to Morocco's Atlas Mountains — from which the form derived its popular appellation of Atlas bear. Although its depletion was certainly due in part to a relentless program of hunting and persecution by local inhabitants, much of the blame for its fall in numbers lay with the wholesale destruction of the vast forests that had clothed much of northern Africa in pre-Christian Roman times.

Nonetheless, as late as 1830 a specimen of the Atlas bear — a present from the Emperor of Morocco — could be seen at the Marseilles Zoological Gardens. And in 1841, as noted by Day in *Doomsday Book of Animals*, an Englishman named Crowther provided a detailed description of the Atlas bear for Edward Blythe of London's Zoological Society. Blythe discerned that it was different in appearance from its neighboring race the Syrian bear *U. a. syriacus*. Soon afterwards a complete specimen was obtained — an adult female killed at the foot of Morocco's Tetuan Mountains. This was formally described in 1844 by Schinz, who christened the Atlas bear *U. a. crowtheri*, in honor of its principal publicizer. It was fortunate that Schinz did document this specimen, for efforts made to preserve it proved in vain and it was ultimately discarded. Day reports it was smaller, although more robust, than the American black bear *Euarctos americanus*, with shaggy hair, black muzzle and surprisingly short toes and claws. In color it shared the latter species' dark back hair, shading to an orange color at the belly.

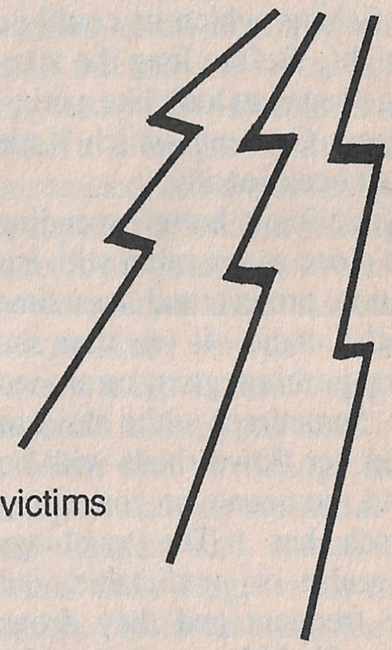
Following the procurement of the above specimen, reports of Atlas bears became few and far between, until by the end of the 19th Century the Atlas bear was apparently a vanished race — at least as far as science was concerned, with its extinction marking the entire disappearance of the bear family from the African continent. Yet in point of fact, reports of small brown bears from these very areas of northern Africa have continued to emerge from time to time right up to the present day.

As Heuvelmans has pointed out, this could be due simply to the fact that *dubb* (the Arabic name for bear) is similar in sound to *dubbah* (the name for hyena — a species that is certainly present here). Yet any explanation seeking to dismiss surviving Atlas bears as illusions arising from language ambiguity must inevitably fail with those accounts that actually describe the morphology of the animals concerned, for small brown bears clearly do not resemble large, striped hyenas.

We have come a long way — right across the globe, in fact — since I mentioned Dr. Vereshchagin's contemplation of the *irkuiem* as an eighth species of modern-day bear. The plain truth is that the *irkuiem* may be just the first of many such mysteries to be laid bare (or should that be bear?) by continuing cryptozoological research.



If Ghosts Could Kill...



Spook was no good-natured haunt — his stunts seemed designed to expose victims to deadly danger.

By Glen I. Taylor

SMITH LAKE in northern Alabama occupies a large portion of Cullman, Walker and Winston counties. The lake was developed by the Alabama Power Company in the 1950's to generate electricity for northern Alabama. After completion of the lake about 1960, the power company stocked it with game fish in order to attract sportsmen and started selling waterfront property. The lake consists of some 500 miles of shoreline in the middle of beautiful timber country, a perfect setting for anybody's fishing cabin.

My half-sister Katie and her husband Lonnie purchased a lot near Big Bridge Marina in the early '60's and started building a two-story cabin. For Katie, who was in her mid-30's, and